

Visual Hierarchy

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Visual hierarchy is the organization of visual elements into different levels of relative importance. Through basic design principles (such as position, scale, value, and weight), the communication designer emphasises one element over another so the viewer is visually drawn first to the content which is most important. Where elements are of the same relative hierarchy, consistency in the use of those design principles will help to maintain that structural association in the mind of the viewer. For example, if we're talking about scale and weight in type, all body text might be kept to 12pt regular while subtitles are 14pt bold and titles are 16pt black. Everything is organised on the page to create a sense of order and importance.

This first example has all the text written out without any organisation or emphasis, much like body text is often written.

3 days of Art and Music. Book your tickets,
Spread the word, invite friends.
Where : "Jazz and Blues" When : 21,22,
23th of October 09. Contact
mail@concert.com, call 012356565
Find more details at www.websiteurl.com

Now, just by adding some white space, the content becomes organised into chunks and a simple hierarchy develops where content is arranged into groups and the top grouping of content becomes most important (because we traditionally read from top to bottom).

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But maybe we want to bring even more attention to certain aspects within a specific grouping or further emphasise a particular group. By changing the scale and weight of the text, we can bring greater focus to specific text, while still maintaining associations to other less important text.

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If we wanted to continue with this, we could work with value, hue, saturation, and even position on the z-axis. We could also add content such as icons, graphics or images (among other things) to draw attention and place particular emphasis on an area of the page or specific content.

In the context of web design, one particular use of hierarchy is to help direct the user to the places you want them to navigate. In this case, hierarchy can be used to afford the user with the right path to take and constrain the user from going down the wrong path. For instance, by placing a contact us link alone, in the upper right corner of the page, the user will note it immediately and know not to search through the sub-pages of About Us. In a case such as this, position and negative space create the hierarchy, enabling the designer to direct the user without resorting to larger sizes or heavier weights, changes that might place too much importance on the link. In the example case on the following page, they have done a similar thing with the donate link (don't bother to contact us, just give us money), only they have used a graphic and colour to place even more hierarchical importance on the link.

In this first example the donate link can be clearly seen in the top right of the page and, though it is not at the top of the hierarchical order, it is quite prominent. It is also apparent upon first glance that there is a significant amount of textual hierarchy on this page.



But below shows a basic assessment of the spatial hierarchy on the page. It's broken up into the dominant area (the image of the student at top left), a sub-dominant area (the title section), and a subordinate area (that depends on objects of higher importance).



Notice also that a grid system has been developed and employed on this page to help organise the large amount of text content and other assets into packages that can better be arranged in some hierarchical order, as well as making it easier to visually navigate.